

Staying Silent in the Face of Crime

Immigration crackdown in other jurisdictions may have consequences in Alexandria.

[By Michael Lee Pope](#)

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The man was walking from Mount Vernon Avenue toward Executive Avenue when it happened — he was jumped by six men and brutally beaten. The six suspects fled into the streets of Arlandria, leaving the man struggling for life on the ground as eyewitnesses called 911. Medics put the man into an ambulance and drove him to a nearby hospital, where he died shortly afterward. Police officials say that the medical examiner's autopsy was inconclusive, and a final determination may depend on results of toxicology tests that could take several weeks.

But the questions began immediately. Was a gang involved in the assault? What was the motive of the six men? Are gangs once again taking over in Arlandria?

In more than a dozen interviews with Arlandria residents and business owners, the fear of gang crime was a recurring theme. Yet many of these people did not want to speak on the record about the possibility that a gang might have been involved in the assault, fearing reprisals. They said that having their names appear in the newspaper would bring unwanted attention to their families, and speaking out against gangs might also bring unwanted attention from immigration officials. Several of those interviewed said that potential eyewitnesses to the Oct. 21 assault might even be afraid of cooperating with Alexandria detectives for fear that their immigration status might be revealed when they arrived at the courthouse to testify.

"Given the climate that we are in concerning how some other jurisdictions are handling the issue of illegal immigration, I can certainly understand how some witnesses might be reluctant to come forward," said Commonwealth's Attorney S. Randolph Sengel. "But it's important for witnesses to know that we are not interested in their immigration status, otherwise we are inviting a sort of anarchy in the community."

AS NEIGHBORING jurisdictions such as Prince William County engage well-publicized crackdowns on illegal immigrants, public-safety officials here in Alexandria find themselves dealing with the consequences — especially in areas like Arlandria, which includes a large population of residents from Central America. Many Arlandria residents interviewed last week said they would be reluctant to report a crime, much less participate in the prosecution of gang members. And with the escalating climate of fear created by those seeking a crackdown on illegal immigration, the Arlandria community has found itself at a crossroads just as city leaders were starting to see promising signs of success in the city's ongoing war against gangs.

"This is exactly why I considered introducing legislation prohibiting police from inquiring about immigration status of witnesses," said Del. Adam Ebbin (D-49), who represents Arlandria in the House of Delegates. "But when I approached one of the most conservative anti-immigrant members of the House, he declined. Lots of people like to see immigrant issues as a clear cut, black-or-white issue, but the potential of hurting a murder investigation because of fear or mistrust of police is deadly serious business."

The growing climate of fear in Arlandria comes, ironically, at a time when city officials are doing everything in their power to spread the word that the city government will not be conducting a crackdown on illegal immigrants. Just last month, the City Council unanimously passed a resolution explicitly stating that the city "will neither make inquiries about nor report on the citizenship of those

who seek the protection of its laws or the use of its services" beyond what is required by federal and state laws.

"We have spent a lot of time building trust in this community, and I think the low crime rate speaks for itself," said Police Chief David Baker.

TEN YEARS AGO, the city began an effort to transform the international community in the northeast edge of the city. Patrols were stepped up, and the visibility of uniformed officers in Arlandria led to a decrease in crime statistics. City agencies coordinated an effort to improve the streetscape by adding crosswalks and encouraged revitalization of the neighborhood and community involvement. The City Council approved money for a gang-prevention coordinator and organized interventions focussed on preventing kids from getting involved in gangs. Capt. Eddie Reyes was put in charge of the coordination effort, becoming the face of the city's effort.

"A lot of the effort has focused on fixing the small stuff, like increasing lighting and making sure graffiti is removed quickly," said Reyes.

He delivered keynote addresses to meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous and organized an outreach program to increase awareness of domestic-violence problems. He walked the streets and got to know the community on a first-name basis. Last summer, he was promoted to sector commander — overseeing the Police Department's new high-tech crimefighting approach that uses mapping strategies to implement problem-solving strategies. Yet even as Reyes worked to create a level of trust in the community, many undocumented residents still fear that reporting crimes and cooperating with investigation might result in deportation proceedings.

"That fear is definitely out there," said Reyes. "It's something we have to deal with on a daily basis."

EDGAR URQUIOLA moved out of Arlandria nine years ago, a time when he said that Arlandria was infested with gangs. The telltale signs were the tattoos that bore the hallmarks of La Mara Salvatrucha — also known as MS-13. Back then, Urquiola recalled, young men loaded with jewelry would roam the streets clad in black clothing, picking fights and causing problems. Now that he has returned to the neighborhood after a nine-year absence, Urquiola said in a recent interview, the neighborhood has changed. Police cruisers are now ubiquitous as patrolling officers use empty parking lots as command posts in the war against gang crime.

"They watch everything that happens here," said Urquiola. "It wasn't like this before. Things have definitely changed."

Across the street at My Bakery, manager Eddie Gutierrez agreed that Arlandria was in the midst of change — with new business bringing a more diverse clientele to Arlandria. Nevertheless, he said, he has seen the drug deals go down in the parking lot behind the restaurant, and he was even assaulted himself in the parking lot one night. A few doors down, Lani Vu is the manager of Pho Saigon 8 — a new Vietnamese restaurant. She said that she always makes sure a police car is parked in the lot before walking to her car.

"There is a police presence around all the time, which is reassuring," said Vu. "But that doesn't mean you don't have to watch your back."